Chapter 2

THE CASE OF THE MISSING TRUTH-CONDITIONS

This chapter offers a two-step argument against the truth-conditional approach to meaning. First I argue against its epistemological wing, that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth-conditions, and second I build upon the first step to argue against the ontological wing, that the meaning of a sentence is or determines its truth-conditions.

Strictly speaking, my two target theses – the ontological and the epistemological – both require qualification. To begin with, so as to accommodate the indexical nature of language, it is the meaning of an utterance, an assertoric speech act, or a sentence plus context that determines truth-conditions; the sentence by itself, one might say, merely determines truth-condition conditions. In addition, meaning must somehow be related to relevant conditions: “the sky is blue is true if, and only if, the sky is blue and 1 = 1” fails as semantic analysis. Proposals for dealing with this problem of grain include identifying meaning not with truth-conditions simpliciter but with derivational structures of truth-conditions (Cresswell 1985) or with designated selections of truth-conditions (Larson & Segal 1995: 33), for instance those entailed by the simplest empirical and holistic theory (Davidson 1967). I mention all of this only to dismiss it; these problems of indexicality and hyperintensionality are independent of my present argument, and in what follows I shall often give casual formulations of TC semantics.

Against truth-conditionalism, I shall argue that in many cases and for a given sentence P:

(a) We know the meaning of P.
(b) We do not know the truth-conditions of P.
(c) Therefore knowledge of meaning $\neq$ knowledge of truth-conditions.
(d) Therefore the whole truth-conditional approach is untenable.
Section 2 cites examples where we know the meaning of a sentence yet do not know its truth-conditions, thus making a preliminary case for (a–c). Challenges thereto are considered and rejected in Section 3. Section 3, arguing from (c) to (d), draws wider consequences for the theory of meaning, in particular for ontological versions of truth-conditional semantics proper and for truth-conditional pragmatics.

1. The Argument from Ignorance

Against epistemic truth-conditionalism, that knowledge of meaning entails knowledge of truth-conditions, vague language serves as a prima facie counter-example. Virtually every statement is vague, and for any vague statement P there are borderline conditions where one does not know whether P be true or false. Therefore, in knowing the meaning of P, one does not really know P’s full truth-conditions. What’s more, the argument can be extended against partial truth-conditionalism, the thesis that knowledge of the meaning of a statement is knowledge of only some truth-conditions (Saka 2007a). To strengthen the case against partial truth-conditionalism, I turn from vagueness to non-declaratives (§1.1) and countless other constructions (§1.2).

1.1 Ignorance Regarding Non-Declaratives

On the face of it, only declarative sentences are true; imperatives, interrogatives, exclamatives, and sentences representing a variety of other moods found in the world’s languages are never true or false. But given that non-declarative sentences are meaningful, this contradicts the TC thesis that the meaning of a sentence is its truth-conditions.

To this problem of mood there are three responses.

(i) Reductionism. The most developed TC strategy argues that imperatives are actually equivalent to declaratives, or to fragments thereof. According to some speech-act and Chomskyan deep-structure accounts, (1) below is equivalent to the tenseless or present-tense (a) (Searle 1969: 22, Liles 1971: 65) or to the future-tense (b) (Searle 1965: 42, Stockwell et al. 1973: Chap. 10, Baker 1978: 127); according to generative semanticists, (1) is equivalent to first-person performative (c), (d), or something similar [McCawley 1968, Lakoff 1972a; also Lewis (1970: §viii)]; according to some scholars of practical reasoning, (1) is equivalent either to a threat (e) (Bohnert 1945, Ross 1958) or to a normative statement (f/g), though (f) and (g) introduce fresh problems for truth-conditionalism; according to the paratactic theory, (1) is equivalent to an ordered sequence of declaratives (h) (Davidson 1979a).